

Avant gardes, individuals, institutions

Several recent threads, which connect up with previous threads, address issues of the institutionalization of the avant garde. Here are some further thoughts--trying to synthesize.

Establishment vs. upstart. There's almost always some people who have an instant reaction to attack any ongoing institutions in experimental film/video. Part of this is due to the fact that experimental media almost always posits itself as vanguard in relation to the mainstream of art and society. Even the avant garde's institutions (eg, Anthology Film Archives, Canyon Cinema Coop, Jerome Foundation, various festivals, Millennium Film Journal, etc....maybe even Frameworks?) come under attack from time to time from different sectors of the community for specific sins of commission or omission. More mainstream institutions when they interface with the avant garde also come in for criticism (NEA, Rockefeller, NYSCA, PBS, AFI, etc.).

Some people articulate their criticism from what seems to be a developed anarchist politics. Others seem to just be expressing a sour grapes attitude based on their own experiences. Some of the former discussion in Frameworks has recommended a 'just do it' kind of pragmatic enthusiasm for putting on an event, a festival, etc. That's an important part of the endless renewal of the avant garde, and an important way newcomers and ornery oldtimers get to shape the field. But there's also a strength in the stability and continuity of established institutions, which allow for the accumulation of resources--financial and experiential. The accumulated knowledge gained from history is a resource just as surely as the energy of new projects. Jack Smith carried on a decades long denunciation of Jonas Mekas, yet Anthology is certainly part of Mekas's legacy, and one which helps stabilize and preserve the work of Smith and other earlier filmmakers.

The privileged role of the artist. It is an often unexamined commonplace that the individual filmmaker is the origin, touchstone, and supreme arbiter for avant garde media. But a whole range of institutional structures help build and maintain the experimental media world: technologies of hardware and software, financing, equipment training and access, exhibition, distribution, criticism, education, archiving and preserving, curating, and scholarship. Some makers may assume they stand alone and can do it all themselves, and in many ways perhaps they can. But to do all of one's own exhibition and distribution, if one wants a larger audience than friends and family in one's living space, takes time, talents, and resources. And those detract from what's available for making more work.